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NOTES.

THE CONDITION OF THE BRITISH AGRICULTURAL LABORER.

A REPORT¹ on The Agricultural Laborer recently issued by the Royal Commission on Labor presents some interesting generalizations as the result of a study of the agricultural situation in the United Kingdom during the last twenty-five years. This General Report, summarizing and digesting the materials collected for the commission, is the work of Mr. William C. Little.

The situation at the beginning of the period selected for comparison (1867-1893) and the course of the development since then are characterized as follows:

Agriculture was flourishing, and was, indeed, approaching the zenith of her prosperity. Laborers' unions, strikes, and lockouts had not yet disturbed the relations of employers and employed. In almost every respect the conditions of the various classes engaged in and dependent on agriculture have since then experienced a remarkable change.

It is no exaggeration to say that in the quarter of a century which has elapsed . . . a quiet economic revolution, accomplished with little aid from legislation, has transferred to the laborers from one-fourth to one-third of that profit which the landowners and farmers then received from the cultivation of the land. (p. 2.)

Mr. Little finds that the trade union movement which has been making some headway among the agricultural laborers of late has not, so far, been an effective contrivance for accomplishing any one of the objects sought by it. Trade unions are still weak among the agricultural laborers, being found in any appreciable force only in a few counties, especially in the east and southeast of England; and as the demand for labor is slack the influence exercised by such unions as exist is also slight.

It does not appear as a result of the whole inquiry that the several trade unions which exist among the agricultural laborers have enrolled a sufficient number of members to enable them to speak with authority, and to negotiate terms with any association representative of farmers. To estimate the num-

¹ *The Agricultural Labourer*, vol. v. part i. (*General Report of THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON LABOUR*). London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1894.

ber of agricultural laborers who are members of some trade union or other at the very highest they cannot be put at more than 50,000, which is less than one-tenth of the adult males in the class of wage-earners in agriculture. (p. 153.)

As regards the general relations between employers and employed:

There is to be found in nearly all the Reports of the Assistant Commissioners evidence of some dissatisfaction being felt by both classes, employers and employed, with respect to their mutual relations. In some districts it is felt more than in others, but in none does it seem to have been at the time of the inquiry (1892-93) an actual feeling of hostility. "Pacific but not cordial" . . . appears to sum up the situation very generally. (p. 153.)

An examination of the District Reports will show that while there is hardly one district which does not exhibit some signs of estrangement, there are none where some evidence of kindly and friendly feelings are not forthcoming. (p. 155.)

"It is difficult to find in the conditions under which the laborers live a sufficient explanation of" the variation in the general attitude toward their employers exhibited in the different districts. In respect of annual earnings, hours of work, cottage accommodations, length of engagements, or the possession of land in small holdings or allotments, no rule of any general character can be applied to distinguish the three classes: (1) "good or satisfactory," (2) "fairly satisfactory, generally friendly, etc., amicable," and (3) "unsatisfactory, strained, not cordial."

The more remarkable circumstance is perhaps this, that Mr. Richards, who reports the relations of employers and employed as satisfactory in Cirencester, nevertheless classes that district as the lowest in the scale in respect of the average condition of the agricultural laborer of all the seven districts which he visited.

It is clear that the conditions under which the best relations are preserved are not uniform, and that these relations do not necessarily imply high wages, short hours, good cottages, particular engagements, or facilities for obtaining land, although in some cases, no doubt, the conditions are favorable in respect of one or more of these.

On the other hand it will be found that the eight districts in which the evidence seems to show that the least friendly feelings exist between the two classes, are districts of comparatively low wages and of inferior cottages. (p. 156.)

As to the change in the general conditions of life of the laborers that has gone along with this change in their attitude toward their employers:

There is throughout the Reports of the Assistant Commissioners [to whom the detail work of investigation was entrusted] a general consensus of opinion that the condition of the agricultural laborer has greatly improved during the

last fifteen or twenty years, and if the review be extended to a more remote period, it will be found that this improvement has been continuous. (p. 156.)

If the present circumstances be compared with those existing twenty-five years ago, it is indisputable that the earnings of all classes of laborers have increased, and that the purchasing power of money has also increased; the hours of work have been lessened; machinery has relieved the laborer of much of the severe work which he had then to perform. In many counties the wives of the laborers have been entirely emancipated from field work; for many years past the employment of young children has been prohibited; greater opportunities for free education have been given, and as regards the dwellings of the laborers, it cannot be doubted that, with all their defects, the average standard of accommodation has risen greatly. The laborer of the present day, who is better fed, better clothed, better housed than his father was, may not be fully conscious of the improvement which has taken place, because his ideas have expanded, and his wants, like those of persons in every other class, have grown. But none the less he lives in less discomfort, his toil is less severe, his children have a better prospect before them and opportunities which he himself never enjoyed. (p. 159.)

In conclusion I would venture to state very briefly what seem to me to be the principal conclusions to be deduced from the evidence which has been received.

1. The number of those competing for employment has everywhere decreased.
2. The decrease in the number of wage-earners has been most marked in Ireland; but the effect of the decrease has been felt most in Scotland, where only there is a general complaint of a scarcity of laborers.
3. In England a general contraction of employment in agriculture has proceeded concurrently with the decrease of wage-earners and to some extent balanced the supply and demand.
4. The decrease in the number of laborers has improved the chance of obtaining regular work by those who desire it.
5. The universal withdrawal of women from field work is an evidence of an improvement in the circumstances of the laborers.
6. The material condition of the laborer has everywhere improved, though there are still very wide and striking differences as to the amount of remuneration received by them in different localities and parts of the United Kingdom.
7. This improvement, though in some measure due to an increase of earnings, is, however, very largely the result of the cheapening of commodities which are the necessities of life.
8. The least satisfactory circumstance affecting the life of the laborers is the condition of the dwellings which a considerable number of them are compelled to live in. (pp. 163, 164.)

THE University of Chicago Press will publish at an early date a translation of COHN'S *System der Finanzwissenschaft*. The work of translation has been done by Dr. T. B. Veblen, of the University of Chicago, and has been revised by the author, who has also added a preface and made a few changes to bring the work down to date.